

## BRIEFING PAPER NATIONAL WATER QUALITY INITIATIVE

**Subject:** US Department of Agriculture (USDA) - Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) commitment to work with US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and state water agencies to coordinate implementation of NRCS's National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI).

**Background:** In 2012, USDA-NRCS issued a notice regarding NWQI. The NWQI objective is for USDA-NRCS to build more effective partnerships with federal and state agencies and Soil and Water Conservation Districts and together identify priority watersheds where on-farm conservation investments will deliver the greatest water quality improvement benefits. Eligible producers receive assistance under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) for installing conservation systems that may include practices such as nutrient management, cover crops, conservation cropping systems, filter strips, terraces, and in some cases, edge-of-field water quality monitoring. NWQI targets small watersheds (HUC-12 subwatersheds) with streams or water bodies in one or more of the following categories: (1) Impaired – a stream or water body documented to be impaired, and identified on a State's Clean Water Act 303(d) (303[d]) list of impaired waters as designated by the US Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) ; (2) Threatened – a stream or water body with water quality data documenting an impairment, but does not have a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) implementation plan and is not listed on the 303(d) list of impaired waters as designated by the USEPA; (3) Total Maximum Daily Load – a stream or water body that has been on the USEPA's 303(d) list of impaired waters, but may have been removed because there is a TMDL plan for implementation; and (4) Critical – a stream or water body upstream of an impaired segment or area, and is known to be a contributing source of the downstream impairment for a stream in one or more of the three categories above.

**Water Board Involvement:** For the past three years, Water Board staff has been developing the Irrigated Lands Regulatory Program (ILRP) to utilize both regulatory and non-regulatory approaches to protect and restore water quality in waters of the state that are impaired by agricultural discharges. In this regard, Water Board staff has:

- Developed collaborative efforts with several agricultural related agencies/entities, including the USEPA - Region 9 and USDA-NRCS.
- Supported NWQI as an excellent program to enhance this collaborative effort to invest public funds in selected priority watersheds.
- Determined that this effort will improve water quality and assist targeted growers to comply with ILRP requirements and the requirements of the Nonpoint Source Implementation and Enforcement Policy.

We are in the second year of NWQI. The first year (2012), NWQI supported producers willing to implement water quality conservation practices in Revlon Slough and Mugu Lagoon located in the Calleguas Creek watershed. There were seven Calleguas Creek watershed participants that signed up for 14 different practices for a total of \$490,000 in funding. The top practices funded include: lined waterway or outlet (\$221K); irrigation reservoir (\$153K); underground outlet (\$26K); pond sealing or lining (\$24K); nutrient management (\$20K); pumping plant (\$15K); irrigation water management (\$10K); irrigation pipeline (\$9K); grade stabilization structure (\$8K). Two HUC12 watersheds along the Garcia River in Mendocino County were funded in 2012, but funding did not continue this year as all interested landowners had been funded.

For this year (2013) five HUC-12 watersheds that Water Board staff targeted were recently approved for funding. Calleguas Creek Watershed is one of the highest priorities in the state (Mugu Lagoon, Beardsley, Los Posas Arroyo, and Revlon-Calleguas Creek subwatersheds). These watersheds were selected because they have:

- A high level of grower interface and participation in the ILRP which includes public education and outreach. This high level of grower involvement provides for better communication, participation, and accountability.
- Sediment and/or nutrient impairments, existing watershed plans, and are already targeted by Water

Board and USEPA water quality programs.

- Robust monitoring networks that could allow the program to effectively assess whether water quality improvements are being achieved.
- Potential for recovery (i.e. CWA 303 (d) delisting) if water quality management practices are implemented on agricultural and forest lands.
- Continued investment in watersheds previously selected and expanding into adjacent watersheds allows the greatest chance of achieving the goal of improving water quality to meet the objective of the NWQI of assisting growers meet water quality regulatory requirements.
- Addressed the majority of point sources in watershed, leaving primarily nonpoint sources to focus on.

The other watershed selected is the Salt River. While the Salt River is not on the state and EPA highest priority list, NRCS has targeted funding to the Salt River in the past; and, has a lot of landowner interest in trying to find solutions. Chorro Creek and some of the other state priorities were not funded because of a lack of landowner interest. Regional Water Board ILRP coordinators, USEPA, Farm Bureaus, and the Resources Conservation Districts will continue to solicit grower participation in Chorro Creek and other targeted priority watersheds.

**Next Steps:** After implementation of the management practices in these watersheds, USEPA and Water Board staff can provide support to this NWQI effort by pulling together available water quality data to assess whether the resulting implementation has yielded water quality improvements in the selected watersheds. Regional Water Board ILRP coordinators, USEPA, Farm Bureaus, and the Resources Conservation Districts will continue to solicit grower participation in targeted priority watersheds.

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